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Author(s): Mae M. Ngai

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Nationalism, Immigration Control, and the Ethnoracial Remapping of America in the 1920s

In *Strangers in the Land* (1955), John Higham wrote, “The anti-foreign wave that flowed without pause for two decades in the early twentieth century . . . must stand alone in its persistence, in its complexity, and in the massiveness of its institutional deposit . . . The country would never be the same again, either in its social structure or in its habits of mind” (1). Higham’s classic book remains one of the best studies of anti-immigrant thinking in American politics, especially with its analysis of the evolution of race-based nativism in the early twentieth century, which led Congress to pass restrictive immigration legislation in the 1920s. In the long history of American immigration, the so-called “quota law” was arguably the most important change in official policy. It marked a fundamental shift in orientation toward foreign immigration, from normatively open to normatively restrictive.

Higham and other immigration historians of his day wrote mostly about European immigration. It was not until the advent of ethnic studies in the 1970s that the experience of non-European immigrant groups, notably Latino/as and Asian Americans, began to receive sustained attention from scholars. Recently, immigration and ethnic historians have pushed the field further in two respects. First, they consider immigration, race, and ethnicity in comparative terms. How do the experiences of European, Mexican and other Latino/a, and Asian migrants compare? How do they compare with that of African Americans? How have changes in law and policy altered the racial landscape of American society over time? Second, scholars are more interested in situating U.S. history in a global context. This is especially important in the field of immigration studies, which necessarily involves economic and political conditions abroad, U.S. foreign relations, and myriad international networks. In this essay, I discuss the politics of immigration restriction during the 1920s.

Before World War I, immigration into the United States was virtually unfettered, reflecting a tradition of *laissez-faire* labor mobility that dated to the colonial period. Some twenty five million people, mostly from Europe, entered the United States between 1880 and World War I; only 1 percent was excluded, mostly for health reasons. In

the early twentieth century there were no passports, no visas, no green cards. Immigrants who took out their “first papers” (declaring their intention to become citizens) voted in local elections in New York and other cities.

Chinese exclusion was the exception to the rule of open immigration. Like their European counterparts, Chinese laborers migrated to the United States in the nineteenth century to participate in the nation’s industrial expansion. But on the Pacific coast Chinese migrants collided with the racial imperatives of American manifest destiny—the ideology

of continental expansion that declared that the Western U.S. was the domain of Anglo-Saxon civilization. Beginning in 1882, Chinese and then other Asians were excluded from both immigration and naturalized citizenship (2).

The practice of open immigration did not mean that immigrants were uniformly welcomed and embraced throughout American society, or that they easily achieved the “American dream.” Large-scale global migrations in the late nineteenth century both met demands for labor and rankled settled populations’ sense of security. During the Progressive Era, immigration was inextricably linked to the major social problems of the period: industrial class conflict, urban slums, and political machines. The immigration debate took place mostly among Euro-Americans, social darwinists and Americanizers, who disagreed about the possibilities for assimilation. Some immigrants proposed, alternately, that ethnic diversity was good

for American democracy, but this was a marginal view in political and intellectual discourse.

During and immediately after World War I, a confluence of political and economic trends impelled the legislation of immigration restriction. Wartime nationalism had produced a feverish sentiment against presumably disloyal “hyphenated Americans.” While war nationalism was aimed principally at German Americans, it provided a popular basis of support for nativists that had been campaigning for restriction since the 1890s. The Red Scare of 1919-1920, which equated foreigners with radicalism, gave yet additional support to immigration restriction. Significantly, business interests were less invested in

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Mexican workers gathered outside a San Antonio labor bureau, 1924. (Photograph courtesy of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.)

immigrant labor after the war, which remained one of the biggest obstacles to the restrictionist cause. By 1920, industrial capitalism had matured to the point where economic growth could come more from technical advances in mass production than from enlarging the workforce (3).

Immigration restriction marked a political victory for Progressive-Era race-nativism as well as the isolationism of the interwar period. But it was, more broadly and more enduringly, a product of the global era of “high nationalism” that scholars associate with the period from World War I to the late twentieth century. Understanding restriction from this perspective helps situate American immigration policy in a global context and explains why the edifice of restriction has remained in place to the present day. To be sure, modifications were made after World War II and in 1965. But the foundations of restrictive policy that were consolidated in the 1920s—a bureaucratic state regime based on border control, numerical quotas, and removal of illegal aliens—have remained solidly in place (4).

World War I both destabilized and entrenched national boundaries. With the final demise of dynastic empires (Russia, Austria-Hungary, Ottoman) a global system of nation-states was consolidated, dominated by the most modern and industrial nations of the north Atlantic. The interstate system gave primacy to the territorial integrity of the nation-state, based on the principles that national borders are inviolate and that no nation can interfere in the affairs of another. Importantly, the right of self-determination enshrined in the League of Nations did not extend to European colonial possessions. That would take another world war to accomplish (5).

While intended to achieve order and peace, the international system, based on “crustaceous” borders, ushered in an era of “hypernationalism” in immigration restriction. Strict border and passport controls and state restrictions on entry and exit became the policies governing emigration and immigration (6). The Immigration Act of 1924 was part of this global trend. It required, for the first time in the United States, arriving immigrants to bear passports and visas that documented their national identity and their authorization to enter, respectively, and to pass inspection at official ports of entry.

World War I also created the problem of millions of people *without* national citizenship: war refugees and stateless persons, as well as those denationalized by European governments after the war on grounds of their ‘enemy origin.’ The concept of inalienable individual rights, central to European political philosophy, was shown to inhere not in human personage, but in the *citizen*, as rights were only meaningful as they were recognized and guaranteed by the nation-state. The war’s refugee crisis demonstrated that loss of citizenship meant a loss of rights; as Hannah Arendt famously wrote, it signaled the “end of the rights of man” (7).

Indeed, the rush after the war to legislate restriction in Congress, while argued in the domestic political language of racial nativism, was a direct response to the specter of over one million war refugees seeking entry into the United States, aided by a drop in the cost of transoceanic travel. As an emergency measure, Congress passed a bill in 1921 that reduced European immigration to three percent of the foreign-born population. In 1924, Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Act which imposed a numerical limit of 155,000 admissions per year (compared to an average of one million a year before the war) in

quotas that were distributed in such a manner as to mirror the “national origins” of the existing American population. In reality, this breakdown was impossible to determine because of decades of ethnic and racial mixing. Predictably the quotas favored Great Britain, Ireland, Germany and other northern and western European countries, granting them two-thirds of the total (8).

The law also categorically excluded Asians from immigration. Since the late nineteenth century Asiatic exclusion had progressively broadened, from the Chinese exclusion laws to a “barred zone” (from Afghanistan to the Pacific) written into the Immigration Act of 1917. Japanese immigration was governed by the so-called “Gentleman’s Agreement” of 1908, a diplomatic agreement between Japan and the United States that limited, but did not entirely exclude, Japanese immigration. The Asiatic Exclusion League lobbied forcefully in the 1920s for a statutory ban on Japanese immigration.

Asiatic exclusion was completed with the Immigration Act of 1924 through a provision that excluded all persons “ineligible to citizenship.” The concept was based on two Supreme Court decisions of the early 1920s that upheld the racial requirements for naturalized citizenship—which was reserved for “white persons” and “persons of African nativity and descent” in naturalization laws of 1790 and 1870, respectively—and ruled that all Asians were ineligible for citizenship. Asiatic exclusion, then, was a formidable policy that not only forbade Asians from entering the United States, but prevented Asians who had managed to come from acquiring naturalized citizenship, in effect foredooming them to permanent foreignness.

The Chicago sociologist Robert E. Park astutely discerned the difference in attitude towards America’s Pacific and Atlantic borders. Park wrote, “These laws have created on our Western Coast a barrier to immigration that is distinctly racial. Its purpose is not merely to limit [as with Europe] but to stop immigration from Asia. It is as if we had said: Europe, of which after all America is a mere western projection, ends here. The Pacific Coast is our racial frontier” (9).

The Johnson-Reed Act also exempted countries of the Western Hemisphere from numerical quotas. To be sure, there were advocates for excluding or restricting Mexican immigration in the 1920s. The nativists, who opposed Asians and south and east Europeans as racial undesirables, also logically opposed Mexicans, whom they considered an unstable “mongrel race.” Notwithstanding public pressures for global restriction, two factors trumped Western Hemisphere quotas.

The first was agriculture. By 1920 large-scale production in the Southwest of fruits and vegetables for a national market was poised for takeoff. The new “factories in the field” needed a large, mobile, and seasonal labor force. During the 1920s, migratory agricultural work drew large numbers of new immigrants from Mexico as well as more established immigrants and Mexican Americans.

The U.S. State Department, concerned about American diplomatic and business relations south of the border, was perhaps even more influential in pressuring Congress to exempt the Western Hemisphere from quotas. By the turn of the twentieth century, U.S. commercial interests in Latin America and the Caribbean had become extensive, especially in Mexico (oil), Cuba (sugar), and Central America (fruit). During the 1920s, Washington began moving away from the crudely

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
IMMIGRATION SERVICE

OFFICE OF CHINESE INSPECTOR IN CHARGE
DISTRICT OF NEW YORK AND NEW JERSEY
U. S. MARINE OFFICE
NEW YORK, N. Y.

TELEPHONE: BRAD 3411

BY ANSWERING REFER TO
FILE No. 12/160.

C.I. No. 45702

Issued 1/17/23.

Granted GOON YUCK WAH

Class Nat. son. Sex M.

Age 24AR. Height 5 ft 3 1/2 in.

Marks Pit center forehead; pit left cheek.

Landed at New York from China the 16th day of January 1923.

I hereby acknowledge to have received from the Inspector in Charge Chinese Division, U.S. Immigration Service, New York City, said certificate of identity this day of 1923.

Goon Yuck Wah

Witness. W.P. Sullivan

Title. Insp.

U.S. Department of Labor papers for Chinese immigrant Goon Yuck Wah, 1923. (Image courtesy of National Archives, NRAN-85-CHINEXCL-12(160)-24.)

interventionist dollar diplomacy of Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft and towards a softer Pan Americanism and “good neighbor” policy. In that context, immigration quotas would have been viewed as an unfriendly act.

Although formally there were no numerical quotas on Western Hemisphere immigration, the general regime of restriction adopted in 1924, nonetheless, weighed heavily upon Mexicans. The new order required a passport, visa, head tax, and inspection of immigrants at an official port of entry. Many Mexicans, unable to afford the visa fee and head tax, avoided the process and crossed the border informally, as they had done for years. But this now made their presence in the U.S. illegal. Border enforcement, which had historically targeted excludable Europeans and Chinese trying to sneak into the country from Mexico, shifted to apprehending Mexicans. The number of Mexicans deported increased nearly tenfold between 1925 and 1929.

In 1929, a decision by the State Department to refuse visas to all Mexican laborers except for those with prior residence in the United States served to guarantee that undocumented migration would be a prominent feature of southwestern life. The threat of deportation created a climate of suspicion and harassment, especially in the border

areas. In Texas, the border patrol subjected the growing ethnic Mexican population to racial profiling, with thousands of people interrogated for every person actually arrested for deportation. Mexicans were also subject to Jim Crow segregation. They were excluded from primary elections, public schools, and public accommodations—public restrooms, for instance, were marked “colored men and hombres” (10).

Thus the Rio Grande, itself a border born of war and conquest in the mid-nineteenth century, was reproduced in the twentieth century as an ambiguous boundary line. The border was formally open to immigration and easy to cross—but easy to cross, paradoxically, only *without* documents. The Southwest became another kind of racial frontier, where Mexicans were welcome as cheap and disposable labor but not as members of the polity.

At one level, the quota law was an attempt at large-scale social engineering, aimed at controlling the ethn racial composition of the country (indeed, to turn the clock back) through quotas, exclusions, and deportations. Although immigration policy and practices were always related to nation making, the 1924 act was unprecedented in its scope and in the use of state coercion to achieve a racial vision of the nation. The “national origin” quotas for Europeans had a double effect, both ranking European countries in a hierarchy of desirability and creating a common “white” race set apart from non-whites, such as Asians, for whom an entirely different racial policy (exclusion) applied. Mexican immigration, while not restricted by numerical quotas, became more difficult because of the new visa and inspection requirements, giving rise to undocumented immigration. By the 1930s the “illegal alien,” a new legal subject created by restriction, became increasingly racialized by its association with undocumented Mexicans.

The racial dimensions of immigration restriction were part of a broader ethn racial realignment in American law and society that took place during the 1920s. Labor shortages in the North during World War I created opportunities in northern cities for one and a half million African Americans eager to leave the Jim Crow South. Over 500,000 Mexicans entered the United States during the war years and through the 1920s, working in agriculture, industry, and railroad work in the Southwest and Midwest. These demographic changes presented a challenge for American race and ethnic relations. Before the war most Americans viewed the nation’s “race problem” in sectional terms. There was a “Negro problem” in the South; a “Mexican problem” in the Southwest; an “Asiatic problem” on the Pacific coast; an “immigrant problem” in northern cities. Relatively few people of color lived outside of these regional contexts. But in the 1920s race became a national “problem” and required adaptations and clarifications of policy.

Immigration law shaped the racial status of Europeans, Asians, and Mexicans but did not address the internal migration of African Americans to the North. Jim Crow segregation, which evolved in the South as an effort to reassert white authority over black people in the era of slave emancipation, was ill suited to northern political sensibilities. The Supreme Court would not countenance de jure segregation in the North but upheld racial covenants in real estate on free market principles. The problem was thus solved with de facto residential

segregation, with a color line drawn and policed by covenants, white flight and extralegal violence (11).

A host of federal and state measures filled other gaps of policy. The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 imposed U.S. citizenship on all Native American Indians, stripping the last vestiges of native sovereignty. The 1930 census designated “Mexican” as a separate racial group. The Supreme Court upheld a Mississippi ruling that assigned Chinese to segregated black schools and western state laws forbidding “aliens ineligible to citizenship” (i.e., Asian immigrants) from owning agricultural property (12).

Taken together these legal measures formed a comprehensive race policy suited for a society that was urban, industrial, heterogeneous, and connected. It was, in a word, modern. The updated and amplified racial boundaries of citizenship demarcated “white” (now inclusive of all Europeans) from nonwhites and at the same time, avoided explicit racial language (except for the South). The distinction between citizen and noncitizen proved particularly valuable in this regard, especially for keeping Asians and Mexicans in subordinate status.

With the storied golden door slammed shut to most of the world’s people, the United States entered a period of low immigration, which would persist until the last quarter of the twentieth century. The cutoff of immigration in the 1920s had the ironic effect of promoting the assimilation of Euro-American ethnics during the 1930s and 1940s. In contrast, the categorical exclusion of Asians and the identification of Mexicans as “illegal aliens” served to racialize their foreignness, marking them as permanent outsiders. The legacies of these policies are still felt today (13). □

Endnotes

1. John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (1955; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 330.
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4. On immigration acts of 1952 and 1965 see chapter seven of Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).
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6. On “crustaceous borders” and passports, John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship, and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 93-103, 116-21; on “hypernationalism,” Aristide Zolberg, “The Dawn of Cosmopolitan Denizenship,” *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 7 (Spring 2000): 511-18; Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 20-25.

7. Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), chapter five.
8. For more discussion of the Immigration Act of 1924 act, see chapter one of Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*.
9. Robert E. Park, "Our Racial Frontier on the Pacific," *Survey Graphic* IX (May 1926): 192-96.
10. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, chapters two and four; see also David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987); David G. Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
11. *Buchanan v. Warley*, 245 U.S. 60 (1917) and *Corrigan v. Buckley*, 271 U.S. 323 (1926). Restrictive housing covenants also often applied to Jews and "Orientals." See Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem, the Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York, 1890-1930* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968); Donald Massey and Nancy Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); William Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York: Atheneum, 1970).
12. Indian Citizenship Act, 43 Stat. 253 (1924); on Chinese in Mississippi schools, *Gum Long v. Rice*, 275 U.S. 78 (1927); on alien land laws, *Terrace v. Thomson*, 263 U.S. 197 (1923).
13. On Euro-American ethnic assimilation see Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Matthew Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). On impact of post-World War II reforms on Asians and Latinos see chapter seven of Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*.

Mae M. Ngai is Professor of History at Columbia University. Her book, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) won the OAH's 2005 Frederick Jackson Turner book award.

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